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Namboodiri Woman: Analyzing The Marginalization Of A Gendered Subject

Abstract: Since ancient times, Namboodiri community has retained its high status in the long political and cultural history of Kerala. The cultural representation is a powerful political force which reflects the inner and outer realms of society and also helps to unveil its real nature. It is through cultural forms like literature, films etc. that writers converse, challenge, and rewrite the already set stereotyped images of gender representations. This paper tries to explore one such gendered category called Namboodiri women. This paper also focuses on the traumatic experiences and troubled existence of a set of women who were oppressed and tamed by patriarchy in the name of orthodox religious conventions. It also tries to highlight the real intention behind the patriarchal restriction upon women.

Keywords: Patriarchal, oppression, religious, conventions, caste

In Kerala, Namboodiri community has been holding the priestly position in the deeply rooted hierarchical structure of the caste system . Namboodiri community was formed in Kerala as part of the earliest brāhmana settlement from the Saṅgam period to the last decades of the eighth century (Veluthat 31). The customs and rituals of this brāhmana community were based on the prescribed text Manusmriti. Gradually, a set of brahmana people modified the

rules and teachings of Manu as the time progressed and later when they became politically, economically, socially and culturally an established community. They strictly observed customs as insisted on by the Brahmanical prescribed texts. Sankarasmriti, a text attributed to Sankara, another notable religious text of Namboodiris, which was compiled during A.D. 14-15, remained a collection of existing moral commandments and socio-religious customs among the Namboodiris'. It controlled the social and individual life of Namboodiris' until the first decades of the twentieth century (Sridevi 295).

This paper intends to unveil the orthodox life of the Namboodiri community, especially of a Namboodiri woman's life in a Namboodiri homestead or illam. This paper also explores how far caste and religious customs, conventions, traditions and practices influenced and trapped the innocent lives of namboodiri women. It also studies how namboodiri men became the guardians of their religious rituals and how they retained the hegemonic status in their community. It also discloses the darker aspects of a namboodiri woman's (antharjanam) life and their ritualized nature of domesticity: their role as mere servants in the darker verandahs of the Namboodiri households (illams) and their lack of individuation and agency in life.

It is a known fact that in almost all patriarchal societies women are always subordinated to men. Caste plays a crucial role in the subordination of woman in each hierarchy of the caste system. In the early period, Namboodiri women were subjected to many patriarchal restrictions. Patriarchy framed laws to be followed by women in accordance with the strictures of the Namboodiri community. A namboodiri woman was always under surveillance of patriarchal men even before and after marriage. This close surveillance and imposed celibacy upon woman can be viewed as a strict mechanism to maintain the purity of their caste.

As Sheila Rowbotham has put it, "Women were for many years hidden from history" (52). Like that namboodiri women were constrained within the four walls of Hindu religion and traditional upbringing. The life of a namboodiri woman in the bygone years reflects the

cruel rendering of patriarchal oppression. J. Devika states that gender was one of the inevitable tools of internal regulation among the Namboodiri community of Kerala. The universalized and internalized code of conduct of a Namboodiri woman was like this, "All women (past puberty) had to observe elaborate seclusion (ghosha), and they moved out of their homes only with the cloak (putappu) and the large cadjan umbrella (kuta). Their domesticity was a highly ritualized one, combined with considerable amounts of domestic labour" (Devika, *Antarjanam* xxi). Even their bathing, dressing, wearing ornaments etc. were all subjected to religious rules and regulations. Devaki Nilayamgode states that a Namboodiri woman was always accompanied by a Nair woman as her maidservant even while walking a small distance from her illam. She recalls,

One of their duties was to order the lower castes to make way for the antharjanam. Yet another duty was to carry the children; if an antharjanam had two or three, she would be allowed as many helpers. If a person of a lower caste strayed into their path, the woman would draw a line on the ground which the person was asked not to cross. Then she would measure the distance between them and the line to determine whether the antharjanam had been polluted by the untouchable (92).

Another section of women, even more oppressed than the namboodiri woman in namboodiri community, was Namboodiri widow who was destined to complete her life cycle by doing penances, fasting, rituals and prayers like a living corpse (Krishnavarier 27). It was considered that with the death of her husband, a Namboodiri widow should cremate and sacrifice her material pleasures on the pyre of her husband. Even in their old age at 70 and 80, Brahmin men married young girls as their third or fourth wives. These girls became widows sometimes soon after marriage or within a year or two. Many widowed women were trapped in the kitchen to do the household work. They were trained "not to participate in any auspicious

ceremony or even to be seen by others and made sure that they conformed to all the observances prescribed for widows" (Nilayamcode 78).

Nilayamcode says,

In the Namboodiri community, nothing was considered a greater sign of misfortune than the sight of a widow. She was unwanted and referred to as the woman without the marital symbol, the thaali around the neck. It was a bad omen to see her on any auspicious occasion. In those days, many young girls had lost their husbands, even before they had emerged from childhood. (78) Many child widows were destined to live miserable lives in the Namboodiri households in Kerala. During that period Namboodiri community was strictly following the system of primogeniture, according to that only the eldest son can marry from their own caste and the custom not permitted the younger males to marry from their own caste. Therefore, younger males were forced to seek alliances from the matrilineal castes like Kshatriya, Nair communities, and other temple castes. Consequently, many young Namboodiri women were destined to marry old Namboodiri men (Devika xx).

In Hindu religion, the observance of permanent enforced widowhood is seen as a pride among the higher caste. Similarly, regulation of the sexuality of upper caste widows and women is also seen as a method to maintain the highest rank in the social hierarchy. She points out that the control of women is achieved through the institution of marriage. She opines that using the single caste framework, patriarchy creates a hierarchy of caste and cultural systems in which the lower castes labour and reproduce labouring castes whereas the high castes do not participate in the labour and reproduce only ritual specialists (Chakravarti 63).

Chakravarti further points out that, other than her husband a woman has no reason for existence in the upper caste or Brahmin community. She has no personhood or single existence; not only that she no longer belongs to that community in any other roles as a daughter, daughter-in-law, mother, etc. (ibid 64).

Through the enforcement of widowhood gender is manipulated to maintain caste morality. All the historians of gender have concentrated their attention on the tragic effects of enforced widowhood as a means to regulate women's sexuality. Therefore, the centrality of widowhood is very much interrelated with the concepts of caste purity. However, in "Caste, Gender and Indian Feminism" Anupama Rao suggests that the issue of "widowhood raised questions about the relationship between regulated sexuality, inheritance, and caste status in the Hindu marriage structure" (18). Similarly, the ideology of widowhood is crucial in maintaining caste boundaries. In the upper-caste family, widowed women were always dependent and vulnerable. Exploitation of their physical energy was also one of the major factors behind the insistence of widowed women to be dependent on the family. Rao further opines that the notion of 'social death' reminds widows about the regular exploitation of their labour. Aspects like the strict injunction of sexual regulation, material expropriation and the dependent status of widows in the family made austere widowhood a powerful symbol of upper-caste patriarchy (18-19). Though widow is a person who has no social existence, her presence as a sexually active being creates great anxiety in the community. Consequently, attempts are made to restrict her freedom within the joint-family household. Furthermore, more drudgery was imposed upon a widow and moreover, her work, though it is essential to run the household, is always sidelined. Another notable thing is that this extraction of labour from widows gives freedom to another section of women who toil inside the family.

Adopting Chakravarti's argument, Anupama Rao remarks that "Though widows were outside the ideologies of marriage and domesticity, they served as a reminder that coercive conceptions of protection and affection were only ever episodically available to women—that these were contingent on the husband's physical presence" (19). But it is important to recognize the fact that, many widows, who have experienced the bitterness of widowhood, still consider it a privilege to work without any expectation within the family. Rao opines that widowhood

is explicitly seen "as a form of material surplus that added to the domestic economy" (19) and also "a limit-condition for thinking about the constitution of the family" (ibid). Hence, needless to say, the intention behind the ideology of widowhood is also Brahmanical patriarchy's obsessive concern to control their women's sexuality and thereby guarantee the breeding of pure blood (Chakravarti, Gendering 36).

The double standards and orthodox notions of the upper caste patriarchy were evident in some of their customs they practised in the olden days. It is significant to note that as per the custom prevailing among the Brahmins during the past years, they would not cremate a woman in her virginhood. It was commonly believed that if they cremate a virgin woman she would not enter heaven. Therefore, as a solution to this, Brahmins called upon the lower caste men to have sexual intercourse with that dead woman to spoil her virginity. It is important to recognize the fact that the body of the upper caste woman is an untouchable thing for the lower caste men when she is alive. Not only that, in order to avoid any liaison with any lower caste men, the upper caste men keep an eye on the upper caste women. It can be seen that this close surveillance is to avoid the danger of having varnasankara (mixing of castes). But, after her death, the same untouchable body becomes a tangible one for the lower caste men.

It is evident that namboodiri woman was trapped within the orthodox religious customs and caste practises. They were marginalized and relegated to the inner walls of their households and were lived as mere objects of patriarchal power.

Many postcolonial writings unveil the unrevealed aspects of the nineteenth and twentieth-century India. As Frankenberg and Mani argue, the postcolonial is not a monolithic formation. It is the compendium of different experiences of persons from colonizing and colonized countries. Therefore, the studies related to postcolonial are also "divergent, producing new analytic strategies within many different disciplines and fields" (Grewal 52). Thus, Grewal and Kaplan suggest that "Post colonial studies cannot be seen as a clearly defined,

bounded area of study, but as a set of changing practices in academic sites that connect questions of modernity to colonialism, and which insist that current forms of power in financial, cultural, aesthetics, and media arenas are linked to imperial and colonial practices" (ibid). By placing culture as an important site to analyze the competing and shifting representations, scholars tried to examine how other nations and empires illustrated the divergent images of other places and people.

Postcolonial feminist theorists such as Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Bell Hooks, Susie Tharu, Lata Mani, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan et al. are prominent among the theorists who questioned different ideological construction of women. While revisiting some of the early texts, post colonial feminists tried to engage with the oppressive power relations deeply embedded in race, nation, and empire; and also for gender, class and sexuality (Lewis and Mills 2). It can be viewed that the ideological construction of Namboodiri woman's life was part of the patriarchal ideology to oppress women. For that, the initiative was taken by the patriarchal men as the guardians of the religious rituals and practices. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin observe that,

Feminist and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant, and early feminist theory, like early nationalist post-colonial criticism, was concerned with inverting the structures of domination, substituting, for instance, a female tradition or traditions for a male-dominated canon. But like post-colonial criticism, feminist theory has rejected such simple inversions in favour of a more general questioning of forms and modes, and the unmasking of the spuriously authoritative on which such canonical constructions are founded. (249)

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